

ARTICLES

A Choreopolitics of Topography: Feeling for Lower Ground in Karen Jamieson's *The River*

Alana Gerecke

Western dance relates to its ground only through the ground's leveling,
through its demise, its forgetting.
~ André Lepecki, "Stumble Dance"

Dusk settles on Vancouver's only cemetery, perched on top of a sloping and dipping landscape that tilts north through the city's first suburb, Mount Pleasant, to meet the ocean. The flow of the visual field toward the sea signals a crucial topographical function: this is the headwater of one of Vancouver's historic waterways, Brewery Creek. On this cool April evening, the sky is beginning to darken; reds and oranges seep from behind the sharpening silhouette of the North Shore mountains. A crowd has gathered. Contained by a set of blue-green cloth banners held by volunteers, the tangled group waits, on the lookout for what to watch. And then the scene comes into focus: seven bodies stand pressed against the cobbled cement wall that borders the cemetery. They are dressed in the tattered remnants of what might once have been a crinoline or a fine suit, each a shade of grey that fades into and juts out of the cement. Their faces, their bare hands, are exposed to the cold and rough hardness of the stone and the concrete, to the cool and cooling spring air. They seem to stand there for an eternity, their movement a certain sort of stillness. And yet, slowly and subtly they melt down toward the loping, grassy ground, a ground filled with so much buried history. Where just now they were standing, they begin to soften, slip, linger, and descend. Their succumbing to gravity takes many minutes. It takes ten minutes. It takes twenty. It takes half an hour. It began before I arrived. It is a revival of yesterday's melt and another before it, and so on.

This is a speculative sketch of the opening scene of settler choreographer Karen Jamieson's *The River* (1998), a site-specific dance choreographed and performed before the term "site dance" and its permutations, "site-based" and "site-specific," were in circulation.¹ The scene that opens this article is my telling of Jamieson's remembering of the piece nearly fifteen years after its production. When we met at her home in Mount Pleasant, Jamieson's recollection of the specifics of the piece was vague. Together, she and I returned to the opening site of *The River* to feel for remnants of the piece, a piece that was mostly undocumented for reasons I'll return to unpack. It was only once we arrived at the cement wall and Jamieson leaned in (seeming to listen to the stone) that the movement vocabulary of the piece's opening scene started to re-emerge: that slow, soft sinking into the ground; that surrender to the downward pull toward the land.

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Karen Jamieson at Mountain View Cemetery, 2012. Photo by author.

In this article, I use *The River* as a case study to think through some of the dynamics of privilege and land-body reciprocity at work in site-based dance. To situate my study, a bit about the production: *The River* involved over one hundred collaborators—a combination of amateur and professional artists, including dancers from the Spákwús Slulum performance group of the Squamish First Nation. The piece was designed around Jamieson’s choreographic impulse to mark the flow of historic Brewery Creek, which has been buried beneath residential and commercial developments for decades. Alongside the Spákwús Slulum dancers and the amateur, community-based volunteer usher-dancers who peopled the scene, the cast included—and centred on the performances of—seven KJD (Karen Jamieson Dance) company members: Shinn-Rong Chung, Laura Crema, Allan Dobbs, Caroline Farquhar, Peter Hurst, Hiromoto Ida, and Rulan Tangen. Seasoned community event organizer Paula Jardine, a co-founder of Vancouver’s former Public Dreams Society, managed the coordination of this large and composite cast.² Performed in four evening-length acts that spanned consecutive nights—April 30 to May 3, 1998—*The River* followed the diagonal flow of the culverted creek through a series of neighbourhoods crosshatched with gridded streets. The audience was invited to gather at a set location each evening at 8 p.m. Each night, the starting point picked up where the previous section of the processional performance had left off (indicated with a red numeral on the map below), moving progressively downstream toward False Creek. This northward migration, sanctioned by the City of Vancouver’s special event permitting process, culminated with a fifth and final act that was performed three times indoors on the Roundhouse Performance Centre stage. But, in a reversal of the typical placement of concert dance on stage, the substance of *The River* was located outdoors: the indoor portion was reworked from the material developed in response to the outdoor sites. I will focus on the outdoor portions of the piece.



The River show program, Vancouver, 1998. Courtesy of KJD.

The movement trajectories and vocabularies of each outdoor act of *The River* corresponded to a distinctive feature or flow phase of the creek. Act 1, “The Headwaters,” navigated the loping grasses of Mountain View Cemetery with a leaning, sinking quality. Snapshot of one moment: three bodies are interlocked in a descent. One dancer tips forward (body and focus taught) into the low-set shoulder of another (bent-kneed and braced to support), while a third dancer hangs onto (hangs off of?) the belt strap of the leaning dancer. Taken together, they show us the press of gravity. Act 2, “The Swamp,” moved through what was called, in settler Vancouver’s early days, the “Tea Swamp”—now a residential neighbourhood and the grounds of a secondary school. There is a reckless frivolity to this act, which features a richly imagined tea party scene (think Alice in Wonderland) with the KJD dancers leaping and strutting—loose and revelling—around a table adorned with oversized tea party food props (a huge teapot, a serving platter, a tiered sandwich tray). Act 3, “The Ravine,” corresponded with the fastest-moving section of the historic creek which cut as deep down as forty feet along this stretch, now a bustling commercial section of Main Street. After descending from street level to meet the audience in a lowered alley, the dancers dash ahead of the front-most audience members before breaking into a full-tilt run that transects the alley, back and forth, back and forth. Punctuating each crossing is the loud, jangling clatter of impact as the dancers’ bodies collide against the metal garage doors that line the alley (the backsides of storefronts). Finally, act 4, “The Sea,” pooled into the historic drainage of the creek, a stretch of mudflats filled mid-century to support development—development that renewed in vigour in the time that has elapsed since the performance of *The River*, particularly in the run-up to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. Carrying props audiences would have recognized from previous evenings in the four-night procession—animal masks mounted on wooden poles (frog, wolf, bear, elk), wire mesh fish sculptures, or a swath of the same blue fabric that framed the processing audience—the dancers weave their way toward the sea.

Though distinct in movement quality, the four acts were unified by some common elements: the ceremonial welcome and closing protocol performed by members of Spákwús Slulum; the accompaniment of live musicians (a range of percussionists and one alto saxophonist); the fringe of volunteer amateur dancers and ushers who helped guide the audience along the route; the presence and conversation (sometimes casual, sometimes scripted) of two local historians who were tasked with situating the performance in its geographical site; and the mobile, mass audience that followed a sustained physical emphasis on the gravitational pull downhill. In the sparse and spotty existing footage of the event, the energetic pull of this last group is notable: the production has the feel of a community parade. Focus is sometimes scattershot; children wander up to performers; audience members show the rhythm of the percussion in small, subtle, and pulsing choreographies as they walk.

The River is significant in the history of Vancouver dance for a few reasons. By the most obvious rubric, it drew together a lot of bodies. I have described the size of the cast (dozens strong); this group grew by hundreds on performance nights. *The River* drew a large audience, between 200 and 350 people for each of the “creek walks” by the company’s records, for a total of over 1500 audience members for the outdoor procession (Karen Jamieson Dance 2008)—a substantial crowd for a site-based contemporary dance piece. And its scope was ambitious: in tracing historic Brewery Creek, *The River* traversed nearly forty city blocks. But even more significant than the scale of the piece was its key formal intervention: a departure from the stage. Now, I need to pause here to qualify this claim. I am well aware that it is by no means new for dance to be situated off stage. Indeed, writing and practising in the context of settler Vancouver—the unceded traditional territory of Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations—it is absurd to imagine that basing dance outdoors and off-stage is innovative. By contrast, centuries-old and ever-developing contemporary Indigenous traditions of land-based dance are part of the cultural and aesthetic landscape of the Pacific Northwest coast—not to mention the younger histories of street dance, jazz, hip hop, and other forms in the city. Yet, Jamieson’s choice to move her otherwise stage-based training and practice into an outdoor, everyday space was a break from her trajectory as a professional contemporary dance-maker. This production marked a turning point for Jamieson, a key figure in Canadian dance who would go on to make crucial forays into community-based and site-based dance in the city, and contribute in important ways to efforts to decolonize concert dance in Vancouver in the coming years.³

Crucially, *The River* was also a break from the expectations that shaped concert dance in the area in the late 1990s. Site-based experiments had rippled through the professional contemporary dance scene in Vancouver for some time,⁴ but Jamieson’s choice to develop a major, (multi-)evening-length work along the stream corridor was a factor in the restructuring of funding for contemporary dance creation in the province. The poor critical reception of *The River* owed, in part, to a lagging development of valuation criteria for community- and site-based pieces at the time. Assessed within a review system that had not yet left the stage, the merits of this site-based dance found no purchase with its reviewers and put KJD in poor standing for the next many years of funding.⁵ The British Columbia Arts Council’s (BCAC) project evaluators focused exclusively on the one-night stage version of *The River*, without taking into account the four-night site-based procession (Poskitt 2013). Jamieson’s growing body of site and community-based works was one of the catalysts for the development of a branch of BCAC peer assessments that specialized in works situated off stage (Poskitt 2013), a shift that would make space for a wider range of recognized values in dance funding.

But, despite what I have articulated as *The River's* importance to dance history in Canada, it is impossible for me to get a retrospective fix on the dance as a choreographic object. I missed the live performances of the piece. (I was still living in Toronto during the run of *The River*.) Exacerbating this is the fact that the piece is poorly documented, as I've mentioned, particularly in comparison to other of Jamieson's major works. The dearth of documentation of the production exaggerates the dance's much-touted ephemerality.⁶ This gap in documentation is the result of a combination of factors: the strained critical and peer reception; the extra-ephemeral nature of site-based dances, which exist outside of the production elements of capture so common in theatre spaces; and a gap in management at KJD during the late nineties. Things have shifted somewhat in the past few years by virtue of KJD's renewed online presence, but when I started researching this piece in 2011, there was virtually no trace of *The River*. I had to sift through the company's archives to find photo-documentation (a handful of images); press clippings from the print media reviews of the day; and a video taken by the Brewery Creek Historical Society that tracks the two historians who accompanied the dancers and records footage of the choreography only peripherally and infrequently. Part of the work of this article, then, is simply to provide a record of the piece and to situate it in a lineage of site-based dance in the region. This is worthwhile, I contend, not only because the piece is significant in the nested histories of Vancouver, British Columbian, and Canadian dance, but also (and admittedly) because it allows me to discuss some of the traits of site-based dance practice that I am interested in teasing out. But I need to acknowledge that this is not a culturally benign act: the act of archiving this performance is propped up by Jamieson's high art status and by my academic credentials, hierarchical markers of privilege that define our practices, despite our respective efforts to trouble the colonial assumptions on which they rest.

Taking Place, Taken Place

I offer a reading of *The River* as a case study that supports a larger theoretical framework of site-based choreography in a concert dance tradition.⁷ *The River* allows me to fold together an ecological reading in the context of a recent history of urban redevelopment, while attending to the uptake of Indigenous approaches to land by settler bodies. All of this feels important to me as a white, settler dance practitioner and scholar with a vested interest in site-based and community-based work—and someone with a healthy caution about the colonial underpinnings of taking place (consider Vancouver as, itself, a *taken place*) and orchestrating bodies, practices foundational to the project of choreography generally, and to site-based work in particular.

The possibilities of, and limitations to, decolonizing dance studies have come to preoccupy me in the process of writing this article, and they form the central questions that drive my research. Following Craig Fortier (2017) in his study of “non-Indigenous” efforts to support decolonization, I see value in acknowledging these various axes of privilege and power even as I am also aware of the risk of offering merely one of many “confessions of privilege,” as Andrea Smith terms it (quoted in Fortier, 22), without contributing in a tangible way to changing the cultural infrastructure that maintains white/settler power. I accept Sara Ahmed's critique of the foundational logic that grounds such confessions as it is articulated in Selena Couture's examination of the construction of whiteness in Vancouver (2015): drawing from Ahmed, Couture insists that the assumption that “whiteness is invisible” only rings true “for those who inhabit it, and that this assertion assumes a white seeing, and is therefore an exercise in white privilege, *not* a challenge of it” (Couture 2015, 81, emphasis in original). I also maintain, echoing Couture, that despite its structural flaws and insufficiencies, the flagging of white privilege is “nevertheless necessary in order that it become more possible to seek

to understand how the privilege is constructed, maintained and possibly hidden from those who hold it” (Couture 2015, 82).

With the recent and rapid emergence of decolonizing methodologies in Canadian performance studies conversations (Robinson 2014, 2017; Recollet 2015, 2016; Carter 2015; Nagam 2017; Davis-Fisch 2017, 68; Levin and Schweitzer 2017, 25), I am wrestling with how to think through Jamieson’s efforts to honour and embody understandings about land-body reciprocity that come, in part, from her mentorship under First Nations elders—as well as my own interest in topography as agential and co-choreographic—in a way that avoids “extractive” reading, wherein “reading is like panning for gold, sorting through work that may not have been intended for a particular reader” (Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2019, 15). Here, I work through a combination of frameworks: Euro/Anglo-Canadian, Euro-American, and Indigenous. I turn to Indigenous thinkers on land-body reciprocity in an effort to acknowledge that these (eco-critical, new materialist) lines of thought are not new and that they do not originate within the academy; instead, they are a “turn to where Indigenous people have always been” (Smith et al. 2019, 15). But what I come to is not a set of answers; instead, I find myself returning (as I will in my conclusion) to a set of resonating questions about how dance studies in Canada can engage with moving bodies, land, and interred histories on the radically uneven grounds that constitute site.

To be with this work and find an echo of the dance I missed, I have undertaken a methodology that resonates with my claims for site-based dance: that is, one that foregrounds a kinetic reciprocity between land and body.⁸ In my attempts to access some version of the work, I supplemented interviews (with Karen Jamieson, co-founder of and spokesperson for Spákwúš Slulum Bob Baker, KJD dancer Caroline Farquhar, accompanying historian Bruce Macdonald of the Brewery Creek Historical Society, and the late Julie Poskitt of the BCAC) with visits to the KJD archives, and a study of the development of the Brewery Creek corridor. To this research, I bring my movement and somatic training (which spans forms, but has largely been concentrated on concert dance forms based in release technique), my experiences as a site-base dance artist, and a belief that information about the dance’s choreographic modus operandi can be felt in the topography of its route.

With Jamieson, I walked the nearly forty-block route of *The River*, tuning in to the ways in which the topography of the buried creek moved my body, the shifts in kinaesthetic awareness it generated, and the feel of the downstream descent. In particular, I was struck by how this route put me into my heels: that the walk redistributed my weight into my back-body felt like an apt metaphor for my interest in attending to that which I cannot see with a renewed quality of kinetic attunement. Which is to say that what I examine here is informed by *The River*, but it is something else altogether; perhaps it is useful to think of what I sketch here as an archival re-performance of the route. As such, I am not making claims about the feeling of watching the performance itself: my duet with Jamieson down the Brewery Creek corridor misses nearly all of the components of the performance, from the choreographic material articulated by the three groups of performing dancers to the social-kinetic quality that comes of bodies moving together in assembly (Gerecke and Levin 2018). Instead, I pair *The River*’s thematic and physiological emphasis on the living history of its landscape with my own relationship to the piece as a buried moment in Vancouver’s dance and urban history.

Situating my inquiry in the midst of one of Vancouver’s oldest settler neighbourhoods, I ask what performance’s “leak[y]” relationship to time (Schneider 2011, 10) can offer to somatic considerations of place in a settler-colonial urban environment. *The River*’s kinaesthetic tracing of the contours of topography exposes its site, a material transect of an ancient place in a 130-year-old

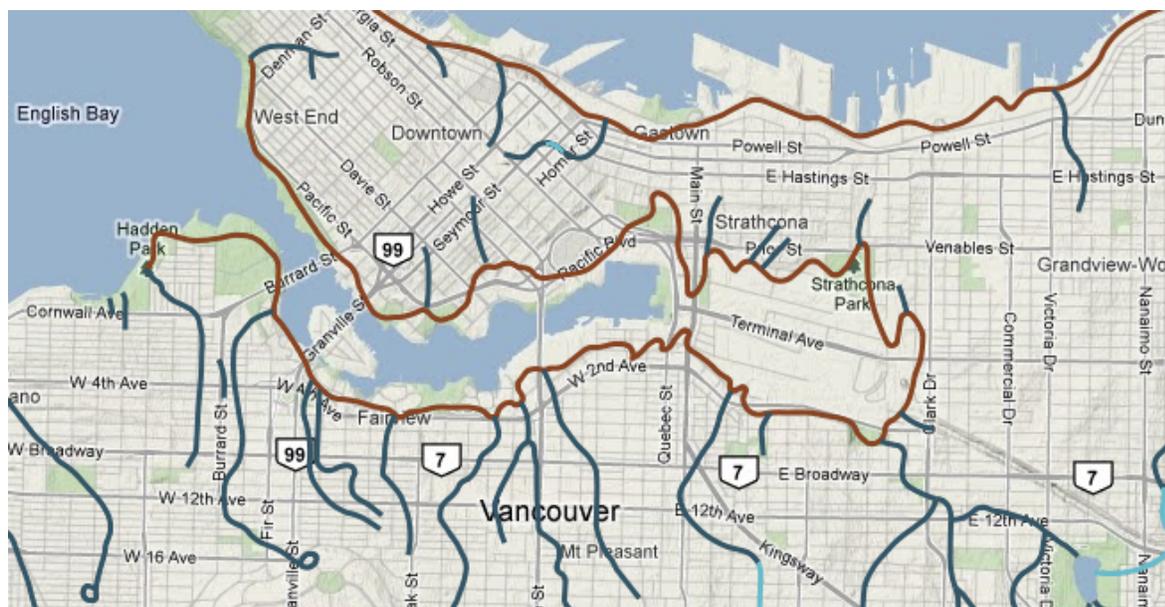
settler city, as unfixed and in a constant flux that is both human-driven and, crucially, otherwise.⁹ I ask: What does it mean to understand the body topographically, and to understand topography choreographically? What does it mean to move—to be moved—along the ground’s cracks, folds, and depressions? By analyzing how the buried creek directs Jamieson’s choreography, and, in turn, how the dance choreographs its audience along the creek’s topography, I argue that the colonial city’s buried past continues, through its interment, to shape the movement possibilities along the city surface. *The River* asks its audiences to follow the grooves and cracks in a seemingly even surface; in doing so, it defamiliarizes the kinetic qualities of these everyday environments, prompting those who follow to re-think and re-feel how they move through, in, against, and with the land’s demands.

Choreographic Topographies

In many ways, Brewery Creek and its estuary served as a foundation for the development of the city. The settlement and resettlement of what is now called Vancouver drew from the nutriment offered by Brewery Creek, both pre- and post-Contact (Harris 1997). A significant geographical feature, the creek served as a gathering and harvesting place for First Peoples from Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh nations, whose presence on the land stretches back beyond recorded history and whose claim to the land has never been ceded. Indeed, an area of False Creek (Brewery Creek’s fluvial output) near the current-day Burrard Street Bridge was a Squamish village site known as Snauq—a site from which the provincial government forcibly removed Indigenous residents at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The creek was lined with vital plants for the region’s Indigenous Peoples, including a range of different edible berries (blueberries, blackberries, red huckleberries, salal berries, thimbleberries, black caps, and yellow and red salmonberries) and medicinal plants (devil’s club, liquorice fern, deer fern, stinging nettle, spiraea, and skunk cabbage) (Turner 1998). In addition, the creek hosted flocks of ducks and migrating birds and some of the largest trout and salmon populations in the region (Donald Luxton and Associates 2013, 7–8). During the early days of the resettlement of the Lower Mainland by European, American, and eastern Canadian settlers, the water from Brewery Creek supported industry. Despite its distance from the heart of Vancouver’s downtown, the creek was integral to the city’s growth: early settlers flumed the freshwater of the dammed creek across False Creek and piped it into the Gastown area, literally feeding the flow of development (Macdonald 2008, 2).

Reciprocally, the development of Vancouver re-shaped (and ultimately interred), the creek. The Hastings Sawmill, located in South False Creek at the foot of Brewery Creek, was a company town and a focal point of historic Vancouver from the 1870s forward. Joined by an upsurge of breweries that gave Brewery Creek its name, sawmills would remain a central presence in Mount Pleasant for over one hundred years, with the last sawmill closing as recently as 1983 (Macdonald 1992, 54–55). The presence of primary industry in the heart of so large and urban a city—a trait that earned it the nickname “Terminal City” in the boom that ensued after the construction of the terminus station of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 1880s—set Vancouver apart from other North American cities. It was not until the mid-1980s that post-industrial Vancouver officially rezoned False Creek for residential use (59). With the explosion of growth in Vancouver that began in the late nineteenth century and continues to this day, the shape of the land and the river has been actively changed: the waterfront surrounding the foot of Brewery Creek, which had been punctuated by a chain of pedestrian-accessible beaches and tidal flats, was filled in to support the city’s growth; the remaining intertidal land later became the repository for soil removed to form the Grandview Cut. Indeed, *The River*’s four-day-long procession along the creek concluded not at the present-day ocean edge, but at

the creek's historical fluvial outflow point. Like many other creeks in Vancouver and in cities throughout North America, the body of Brewery Creek was, by steps, culverted and paved over, such that it literally became built into the foundation of the growing city.



“Vancouver’s Old Streams”: This map depicts the streams that cut through Vancouver’s topography between 1880 and 1920. The blue lines indicate culverted streams and the red outline contours the original shoreline. Map modified from Paul Lesack and Sharon J. Proctor’s “Vancouver’s Old Streams, 1880–1920,” courtesy of the University of British Columbia.

Buried under layers of land and concrete and asphalt, the water-body that was Brewery Creek is now almost imperceptible; but Jamieson’s dance draws out those traces with mechanisms of theatricalization. Grounded on the shifting surface of the Brewery Creek corridor, *The River* performs the present as a porous thing that leaks and seeps with history. For, as Jamieson insists, “as long as the rain falls, as long as the land slopes downward, as long as the sun shines, the stream isn’t gone. It’s still there, still participating in the eternal cycle of water raining down, flowing to the sea, evaporating, raining down” (quoted in Scott 1998a, C5). In fact, community efforts—often Indigenous-led—to revive Vancouver’s buried streams are starting to show success as fish return to many waterways that have long been dormant (Holdsworth 2015).

The present past that *The River* performs contours a pre-Contact landscape, one that troubles imperialist, “patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural)” systems of knowledge that privilege the visual, the material, and the written word (Schneider 2011, 97). Jamieson’s invitation to the Spákwús Slulum performers to contextualize *The River* with Squamish song and dance throughout *The River*, and to follow protocol to seek permission from ancestors to perform on the land, signals a decolonial politics of ephemerality—if a complicated one.¹¹ As Bob Baker of the Spákwús Slulum told me, the group performed protocol in *The River* “to announce to the ancestral world and everyone within hearing range that something that had been around for thousands of years was strolling through the area” (2019). In *The River*, the past not only remains in invisible and immaterial ways (Schneider 2011), and it is not only etched into the foundation of the developed (and redeveloped) Main Street/Brewery Creek corridor; it is also welcomed and performed by bodies whose ancestries extend into the land for thousands of years. In the context of Vancouver,

where the clash between settler-culture imperialism and the traditions of the First Peoples is a prominent issue, Jamieson sides with a traditional Indigenous approach to history and works to make space for traditional approaches to land use: one that finds a function for dance and storytelling in keeping the past present. *The River* performs the history and morphology of the space itself with sensitivity to Coastal First Peoples' intimate interrelations with these lands.

Indeed, the landscape that features in *The River* is more akin to what Mohawk and Anishinaabe sociologist Vanessa Watts has called "Place-Thought" (2013). Looking to Haudenosaunee (as well as Anishinaabe) cosmologies, Watts understands land as agential and animate. She draws from traditional teachings to insist on the ways in which land, topography in particular, enacts its desires on the spectrum of creatures that inhabit it, humans included. With reference to the interrelationship between land and Sky Woman (First Woman in Anishinaabe teachings)—where she is/becomes the earth—Watts observes: "In becoming land or territory, she becomes designator of how living beings will organize upon her. Where waters flow and pool, where mountains rise and turn into valleys, all of these become demarcations of who will reside where, how they will live, and how their behaviours toward one another are determined" (Watts 2013, 23). Watts' contributions to academic theories of land-body reciprocity are key to my examination of Jamieson's work, and to my self-reflexivity about my citational politics as a settler scholar and dancer. Even as Watts affirms the direction of various expressions of what can be clustered together around the category of new materialist thought (from Latour to Haraway),¹² she is also critical of the shortcomings of these theories. Specifically, she laments the "subjugated agency" (28) each attributes to the materials and environments toward which the word expands: which is to say, a hierarchical agency that "is dependent on the belief that humans are different based on our ability of will and purpose" (28–29). According to the two Indigenous cosmologies Watts cites, land perceives, and it acts out its desires in material ways: "To be animate goes beyond being alive or acting, it is to be full of thought, desire, contemplation, and will" (23).¹³ Place-based understandings of creation in the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh traditions also figure land as animate.

A version of this expanded agency, one that listens for the land's desires or the "land's intentions" (Watts 2013, 22), is perceptible along the Brewery Creek corridor. When Jamieson and I retrace *The River's* route, we notice that the buried creek serves as an imperfect, unstable foundation for the developments along its corridor. As we walk through the route of act 2 toward the site of the old Tea Swamp, she gestures toward the deterioration of the asphalt, the sidewalks, the dipping fences bordering leaning houses. Subtly, but visibly, asphalt buckles, bends, and cracks; sidewalks lilt, heave, and mound; properties tilt and sink and rise. The slow shifting of the neighbourhood signals the creek that runs beneath the ground. The creek asserts itself. Bruce Macdonald notes the evidence of the creek in Mount Pleasant's current landscape. To this day, he points out, "the route of Brewery Creek is obvious because it is usually at the low point of the east-west streets, while the streets in the Tea Swamp such as 16th and 17th Avenue east of Main are lumpy and bumpy because of the mushy soil" (2008, 22). Jamieson tells me that her choreography here was a quiet sort of burbling: a soft but active flow that challenged and pushed against the seeming stillness of its surface and surroundings. Following the deepest bends in the route, she and I try to track the route *The River's* dancers and audience followed as they allowed themselves to be funnelled along the pavement by way of the lowest ground, their path charting the depressions along the sidewalk, grass, and street.



The state of the asphalt along a stretch of the site of act 2, “The Swamp.” Notice the buckles, bends, and cracks in the pavement as of November 2012. Photographs by author.

The River's commitment to a sustained quality of down is enacted throughout the piece, but it becomes perhaps most literal in a section of act 3 that situates company dancers below ground level. Here, the dancers descend roughly fifteen feet into a pit in the lane behind a restaurant on Main Street. This pit, Jamieson and others speculate, is one of the only remaining stretches of Brewery Creek's basin, a patch of “dried-up creek bed” (Johnson 1998). KJD dancer Caroline Farquhar agrees that the alleyways just south of the intersection of Main Street and Broadway Avenue were where the history of the city—of the creek—was most clearly felt. Fifteen years later, one of Farquhar's sharpest memories of *The River* features the series of pits that reached down to where the base of the river might once have been. The presence of the absent stream was clearest here, Jamieson and Farquhar agree: in Farquhar's words, “the geography echoed” (2013). Here, the dancers slip down into the ground, and they invite their audience's gaze to follow them down below ground level.



KJD dancers in rehearsal in the pit, unaccredited photograph, courtesy of KJD.

“Politics of the Ground”

Following American dance theorist André Lepecki, there is a politic—indeed, a “choreopolitic” (Lepecki 2013)—inherent in a choreographic engagement with uneven ground. In his effort to

“rethink a politics of movement” in *Exhausting Dance* (2006), Lepecki offers a reading of black American artist William Pope.L’s series of over forty performed “crawls.” Here, Pope.L lies prone, belly-down, on the ground surfaces of urban areas and arduously pulls himself through the city.¹⁴ To read Pope.L’s crawls, Lepecki calls up Paul Carter’s “politics of the ground” (Lepecki 2006, 100), which recognizes “kinetic practices that highlight the body in motion as always already an extension of the terrain that sustains it.” (In working with Paul Carter’s critique of ground in dance, it is worth noting that Lepecki draws indirectly from the Indigenous Australian ways of knowing that inform Carter’s analysis.¹⁵) After Carter, Lepecki takes as a premise the intimate and causal connection between ground and the moving body, which becomes the basis of what he calls a “political kinesis” (Lepecki 2006, 100). Carter, Lepecki tells us, draws a link between colonial ideology and the representational mimetic practices that have long defined Western art, insisting that the Western choreographic tradition is especially ensnared in colonialist ideology in its demand for a flat, smooth dancing surface.

I should pause to point out that in their respective observations about dance and ground surface, Carter and Lepecki both use “Western dance” to mean movement practices that grow out of a ballet and Modern dance lineage—those privileged along classed and raced lines as ‘high art’ by patrons and funding bodies. Of course, this construction of Western dance and its desire for smooth surfaces does not treat—or, indeed, is developed in unspoken contrast to—a range of dance practices that have long been practised in the West, ranging from jazz to street dance to Indigenous dance, practices that take ground as it comes and take it seriously. Lepecki and Carter are interested in the effort toward extraction from the specificities of site that becomes the condition of possibility for colonial dance forms, specifically (as Lepecki’s terminology will soon demonstrate) ballet. For Carter, as Lepecki articulates in the epigraph that opens this article, “Western dance relates to its ground only through the ground’s leveling, through its demise, its forgetting” (2008, 52). That colonial Western dance techniques are assumed to require for their development, rehearsal, transmission, and presentation the flat, smooth ground surface characteristic of studio and stage “annihilates the possibility for dance to attend to the grooves of the particular terrain where dance presents itself” (Lepecki 2008, 52). In these forms, the job of the dancing surface is to be unremarkable: it “must never interrupt, disrupt, distort, distract, and challenge the dancer in her *pirouettes* and in his *glissands*” (52, emphasis in original). The smoothed over, quieted down specificity of a given dancing surface excises certain components of social and historical context, foreclosing the possibilities of movements that would respond to these material nuances.

In a move that qualifies Lepecki’s claim that Western concert dance’s insistence on unblemished rehearsal and performance spaces “annihilates” the possibility of the form to attend to the particularities of the terrain, he examines how proximity to and engagement with any ground surface reveals the “cracks” in its foundation. Following Pope.L, Lepecki drops his critical gaze to ground level, noting: “even the smoothest ground is not flat. The ground is grooved, cracked, cool, painful, hot, smelly, dirty. The ground pricks, wounds, grabs, scratches” (2006, 99). Crucially, this wounding ground acts on Pope.L’s racialized, black body. Invested in a choreopolitics of uneven ground, Lepecki reads Pope.L’s crawl series as a powerful example of “choreopolitical challenges that can illuminate with particular force the conditions of mobility on the colonialist terrain” (100). While cleared and flattened ground is experienced as even and smooth for those who are advantageously situated amidst a variety of axes of cultural, social, political, and historical power, the same seemingly flat ground is exposed as always already riddled with cracks and catches for other (and Othered) bodies defined, in the case of Pope.L, along racialized lines.

I read Lepecki reading Pope.L to suggest that when a movement practice dedicates focused and sustained physical attention to the sometimes subtle, sometimes conspicuous troublings in the ground, that practice stakes a historical, a cultural, and a political claim—one that takes the land as impetus for movement, and one that cannot be separated from the representational politics of the body that does the moving. Drawing attention to the landscape, and to what is interred beneath the buckling pavement, the choreography of *The River* alternates between heightened caution of the physical process of navigating rough and uneven surfaces (the dancers pick their way gingerly along the urban hillside in act 3), succumbing to the shifting ground (the dancers slowly melt downward against the fence of the cemetery in act 1), and violent clashes between body and rough ground surface (full-body throws against the cement in several acts). *The River* “kinetically grounds the question” (Lepecki 2006, 90) of uneven and shifting ground in the procession along Brewery Creek, the hidden flow of which continues to shape the landscape above. The dancers’ repeated contact with rough concrete surfaces draws attention to the literal cracks in the colonial effort to bury the topographical structure of the land.

But the terms of relation with topography in *The River* are different from Pope.L’s in some key ways. Crucially, and without wanting to diminish Jamieson’s genuine and significant efforts toward decolonizing concert dance, it is essential that Jamieson’s choreography of kinetic attunement to the cracks and grooves of the terrain *The River* traverses is inextricable from her whiteness. The critical function of *The River* is also supported by the privilege endowed to contemporary dance in the theatrical tradition—especially in contrast to Indigenous dance forms at the time of performance (in 1998). Even the fact that Jamieson’s choreography had the influence to contribute to an impulse to open funding bodies to community-based and site-based values in dance speaks to the privileged positioning of her practice. I raise this point in consideration of Dylan Robinson’s insistence that “it is necessary to acknowledge the privilege and power that we hold within our artistic and working communities, and then find ways to give over such power that move beyond forms of inclusion” (2014, 306). It is also crucial to note that my own experience of the land in my re-tracing of *The River*’s route is, likewise, inextricable from my whiteness, and from my privileged position as an academic studying concert dance in the Western tradition. Perhaps what my study of *The River* showcases as much as anything is a reiterated performance of the unevenness of “the conditions of mobility on the colonialist terrain” (Lepecki 2006, 100).

None of this undermines the fact that Jamieson’s piece does crucial work to point to the problems of the settler-colonial choreographic framework in which it operates: not only does the performance gear kinetic focus toward a waterbody that that undoes “colonialist terrain,” but it also sets the stream-driven choreography on a spectrum of racialized bodies (the Indigenous body of KJD cast member Rulan Tangen, the East Asian bodies of company dancers Shinn-Rong Chung and Hiromoto Ida, and the legibly white bodies of the other KJD dancers), and it frames the performance with the self-determined protocol-based choreographies of the Spákwúš Slulum. That *The River* was created within a career dedicated to troubling the colonial underpinnings of concert dance is also worthy of note. Jamieson has been recognized by Tsimshian dance scholar Mique’l Dangeli as unique within the Vancouver dance landscape for being “the only non-First Nations dance artist in Vancouver to produce a large body of work in collaboration with First Nations artists,” and in those collaborations, for “her approach to navigating protocol, with its emphasis on humility and self-reflection” (2015, 46).¹⁶ Dangeli goes on to examine the development and terms of these working relationships, including Jamieson’s early missteps, her genuine efforts to learn and repair, and the resulting two-way flows of reciprocity between collaborators (47–51).

The River's performance of the conditions of mobility along insistent and sometimes rough terrain extends beyond the choreography proper (that is, what the dancers perform) to the ways in which that choreography, in turn, choreographs the movement of its mixed and mobile audiences. The piece's kinetic tracing of the buried creek functioned as an invitation for audiences to relate to everyday spaces of the Main Street corridor with renewed attention. As audiences are guided down the historical creek, bodies are asked to feel, not ignore, the grooves, dips, and imperfections in the surface—to physically follow the unevenness of the terrain with a focused attention on the historical shape and shaping of the urban landscape. Jamieson describes her effort to choreograph her audience into the interior of the landscape: "I wanted the audience to identify with Brewery creek rather than look at it as something outside them and apart from them. . . . I wanted the audience to experience the river within their own bodies" (Jamieson 1998, 1).¹⁷ Jamieson seeks to direct her audience's attention not just to ground level, but to the sub-terrain, the water that still flows below the Main Street corridor. The bodies she directs along the waterway are themselves, Jamieson points out repeatedly during my site walk with her, predominantly made up of water. In the process of walking the course of the stream, Jamieson wanted her dancers and audience alike to "experie[n]c[e] the physical sense of it . . . and experience the landscape—wet or dry, cold or warm, steep or flat" (quoted in Scott 1998a, C5). Reviewer Michael Scott articulates the experience from his perspective in the audience: "Where water once met a bottleneck at the beaver dams, the crowd meets the impediment of a small school yard gate. Instead of wavelets, people eddied around, waiting for a chance to go through the spillway" (1998b, F4). Audience bodies are cast, collectively, as waterbody. Throughout each of the four acts, community volunteers carry large silhouette cut-outs of fish and contained the audience inside banners of blue cloth, offering visual reminders of the water that once ran where they now stand—and literally framing the audience as the water, as the content of Brewery Creek.



Community dancers carry a river banner in rehearsal for act 4, "The Sea." In performance, the audience was guided along the Brewery Creek corridor within the boundaries of this blue cloth. Photographs by Vincent Wong, courtesy of KJD.

In its kinetic effect (and affect, too), *The River* casts the historical creek as a co-performer in the dance. Jamieson's funnelling of the audience down the tilted landscape of the buried creek is framed by the constant murmurings of the two attendant historians who repeatedly point out current-day evidence of Brewery Creek's continued flow etched into the developed landscape. Pointing down toward the culverts embedded in the close-mowed cemetery grass and the cracked roadways, the historians drop their microphones down to the grates, amplifying the sound of the still-running historic creek gushing below. On the third evening, dancers clad in ambiguously antiquated

costumes drop to the ground and dig with their hands into a patch of earth near Main Street where, they contend, a patch of original creek bed remains still exposed, as yet uncovered by development. The subterranean world of the creek becomes felt not as an absent presence, but as a tangible, audible actor whose persistence has material and choreographic effects. The Brewery Creek corridor is not just a dancing surface, but a living, dynamic, and demanding contributor to a long enactment of a set of fraught social, spatial, historical, and political moves.

In these ways, *The River* both models and elicits a version of the “sensuous correspondences” Laura Levin has theorized (2014). Levin draws out the stakes of this sort of performed connection to the environmental background by chronicling a series of “camouflage performances.” In these performances, bodies are positioned in reciprocal relationships with their physical environments, each resonating differently depending on raced, classed, and gendered signifiers. Attendant to the ethical stakes inherent in aesthetics that propose porosity and proximity between the body and environment, Levin asks: “What might it mean . . . to present the self not as an atomized individual moving *within* an environment, but rather *as* the environment itself, as something that is coextensive with its surroundings?” (6, emphasis in original). Levin’s investment in the reciprocity of body and environment resonates with Jamieson’s description of her choreographic impetus: *The River*, Jamieson asserts, “began with the desire to explore the possibility that what is written on the land is written on our bodies. Land is a central concern to me. An ancient function of dance, as an art form, has always been to create a ritual connection between the community and the land that it rests upon” (Jamieson 1998, 1).

The River performs background not within a visual or ocular register, but a somatic one. Unlike most of the works Levin examines, *The River* does not oscillate between visibility and invisibility or work toward “blending into the background” (Levin 2014, 4, 7, 9). Rather, building on Levin’s groundwork, I argue that the dance seeks to refigure the environmental background as a driving choreographic force, literally pivotal to the movement articulated. Bringing together Lepecki (and Carter), Levin, and Watts, I see in *The River* (and in the other site-based dance practices I study) a set of important questions: What are the choreopolitics of moving as an extension of a “performing world” (Levin 2014), following the movement impulses embedded in a “Place-Thought” (Watts 2013)? Is it possible to be kinaesthetically attuned—with our differently contextualized and signifying bodies—to the ways in which the land is an active collaborator, a co-choreographer?

Feeling Backspace

By enacting the slow sinking of the landscape back into the topography of the buried creek, by featuring the creek as a mover in the work, *The River* invites its topography to make a claim on its audience’s attention. But it does more too. The emphasis on *down*—on moving downhill and constantly seeking lower ground—foregrounds a kinetic paradox of correspondence. The physics of walking undergoes a transformation when the walker moves from level ground to an upward or downward slant. In order to walk up a slant, a body must exert extra muscular effort to gain elevation, whereas to walk down a slant, a body follows the gravitational pull downward. Physical effort in the downward traverse is not geared toward propelling forward progress. Instead, effort is articulated to slow one’s descent, to mitigate between the “land’s intentions” (Watts 2013, 22) and the body’s physiology. To walk on a slant is necessarily to work against the ground, trying to stabilize on a surface that would pitch the body forward or back.¹⁸ Consider *The River*. Jamieson’s dance works against the tilt of the landscape even as it also follows the downward slope: the crowded

context of the choreography doesn't permit its audience to cede to the momentum built into the landscape it traverses. *The River's* audiences, caught in the thick of a mobile unit of bodies, are asked to follow slowly at a pace set by the dancers ahead and maintained by the volunteers who flank the processing group. Audience members are structured into a shuffle-stepping procession that relies on bodies ahead, behind, beside—both proximate and just out of view. As such, the migration of *The River's* audience is characterized by a paradoxical resistance against the very landscape to which it seeks to yield—a move that foregrounds how choreography is always already shaped by embodied social forces, even as it is also directed along topographical lines.

Walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Jamieson, I notice my weight shift into my heels in order to negotiate the slope of the ground. The physical exertion required to move slowly downward through the tipping landscape generates a sensation of backspace. I notice my joints realign in a subtle back-tilt: knees, hips, shoulders, and atlas lingering behind my centre. There is a quality of *up* too, a cervical extension to balance the downward force. My body indexes the oppositional physiological forces that support movement: the *back* and the *up* to support the *front* and the *down*. Even as I walk forward, some fraction of my weight trails, dwelling behind my intention, in the moment that has just passed. The effect is not so much nostalgic as it is a carrying forward of the back-body, bringing into the present the moment just before and physicalizing the co-imbrication of past with present, present with past. Like the pavement along the Brewery Creek corridor, time buckles, bends, and leaks; and whether brash and virtuosic or covert and underground, the past has a way of erupting into the present (Schneider 2011).

Held in tension (kinetic and otherwise), my attention to backspace in my tracing of *The River* relies on a reaching for reciprocity, a feeling for the bends and folds of topography that honours the *back* contained inside the *forward*. The feeling of *back* moves me toward a non-ocular register, a register that indexes the productive possibilities of knowing-without-seeing. For simply because I cannot see my backspace does not mean that I cannot know it. Any thoughtful mover will understand this. I may not be able to see my scapula or the dimpled line of my vertebra behind me, but I certainly know them: I feel them; I mobilize them; they mobilize me. This is a simple equation (to feel is to know)—perhaps too simple—but it is also linked to a larger epistemological shift that moves away from an ocular regime and toward a kinaesthetic one. Think of backspace as an entry-point (a back-way) into a dance-based methodology that turns its attention to dance forms, dance practitioners, dancing communities, and embodied knowledges often left aside from narratives of dance history. Crucially, this version of backspace is bound to the nuances of its ground, a ground characterized (to return to the epigraph that opens this article) not by its “levelling” but by its sloping contours, not by its “forgetting” but by its foregrounding.

For me, the driving questions that opened this article about the possibilities of decolonizing dance studies in Canada resurface now, reformulated: How might kinetic attention to backspace affirm and hold space for recognition of the sophisticated epistemologies that are embodied by decades- and/or centuries-old movement practices that continue to evolve outside and alongside the Western theatrical tradition? How do the movement principles that structure these practices perform an ethics of engagement with land that can retune contemporary understandings of land-body reciprocity? And how can the long-privileged form of concert dance learn from these movement practices—practices that feel for the contours of the ground in ways that the studio/stage paradigm (as articulated by Carter and Lepecki) obfuscates—without re-enacting colonializing claims on knowledge and practice? An ability (always already circumscribed) to feel *back* becomes a useful metaphor to think this through—but it is more than that too: it is an embodied and kinetic way of

knowing, of moving, of relating. The sensation of backspace holds within it recognition of the limitations of knowledge even as it also insists on the precision and validity of epistemologies that move along somatic, not visual, registers. This kinetic, back-based knowledge undoes its own positionality by insisting that back and front are not discreet at all; rather, they are infinitely interrelated and bound.

Notes

1. In her effort to sketch what she identifies as the first historical and theoretical account of site-specific art, Miwon Kwon demonstrates the excess and slippage of the language of *site*: “Site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, site-related. These are some new terms that have emerged in recent years among many artists and critics to account for the various permutations of site-specific art in the present” (2002, 1).
2. Public Dreams Society was a fixture in Vancouver from 1985 to 2013. It was a nonprofit charity that crafted events to foster public, interpersonal exchange in the city, including the popular Parade of Lost Souls and Illuminares Lantern Procession.
3. A key figure in Vancouver dance since her co-founding of Terminal City Dance (1975–82) and then the Karen Jamieson Dance Company in 1983, Jamieson’s many evening-length works have been presented widely, both nationally and internationally. She has been the recipient of numerous accolades, including a Chalmers Award for Creativity and Excellence in the Arts (1980), a Vancouver Mayor’s Arts Award (2013), and an Isadora Award for Excellence in Dance (2016), and an induction into Canada’s Encore! Dance Hall of Fame (2018). Today, Jamieson’s practice is defined by her continued exploration of nontheatrical spaces, especially with residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) and in her engagements with First Nations communities, philosophies, and elders.
4. Of note, the founding members of Vancouver’s EDAM (Experimental Dance and Music) had been exploring outdoor and off-stage sites since the group’s inception in 1982. Of these artists, Jennifer Mascall (Mascall Dance) and Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi (Kokoro Dance) have gone on to make particularly significant contributions to site-based work in the city.
5. Annual Reports from BCAC show that while KJD was supported with operating budgets between \$35,000 and \$45,000 from 1996 to 1998, the company’s operating budget was cut to \$0 in 1999. The company subsisted on only project assistance (roughly \$17,500 per year) until it began to receive specifically allocated Community Arts Development funds in 2004. This was a crucial year for the company: no longer categorized alongside the other dance companies in British Columbia as a recipient of Operating Assistance or Professional Project Assistance, KJD was the first and only dance company to be funded under the Community Arts Development umbrella in 2004 (BCAC 2004, 68). This pattern was roughly consistent with the company’s funding from the Canada Council for the Arts (Jamieson 2012b).
6. See Peggy Phelan’s ontology of performance as disappearance (1996, 1997); Diana Taylor’s understanding of performance as “repertoire” (2003); and Matthew Reason’s examination of performance as an “archive of detritus” (2008). See also the notion of dance’s “hauntopias” developed by Judith Hamera (2007).
7. For two other foundational approaches to site-based dance, see Kloetzel and Pavlik (2009) and Hunter (2015). Two key contributions to burgeoning discussions of land-body reciprocity in dance studies are Schiller and Rubidge’s *Choreographic Dwellings* (2014) and Kwan’s *Kinesthetic City* (2013).
8. In this, I draw from sensory ethnography and performance ethnography methods developed by Pink (2009) and Kwan (2013), who emphasize the multi-sensory possibilities of observation.
9. For another approach to the urban river as a site of contradiction between site-specificity and mobility, see Donald (2012).

10. The village of Snauq (or Senákw) was expropriated from its Squamish residents through a series of efforts that culminated a British Columbia government sanctioned burning of the village in 1913 (Matas 2000). In 2001, a longstanding old court case addressing the issue was resolved when the Squamish Nation voted to accept a \$92.5 million settlement. For more on the ongoing significance of the area to local First Nations Peoples, see Maracle (2008) and McCall (2016).
11. For an approach to the archive versus oral history debate that is grounded in First Nations land rights claims in a Canadian context, see Johnson (2005).
12. For a foundational iteration of this new materialist perspective that recognizes all matter as agential or “vibrant,” see Bennett (2010). For analyses of recent applications of new materialisms to performance scholarship, see Schneider (2015). For a choreographic strain of these discussions, see Bernstein (2009) and Schweitzer (2014).
13. For two other relevant and recent articulations of Indigenous ways of relating to ground and water through movement, see Betasamosake Simpson (2011) and Christian and Wong (2017).
14. William Pope.L’s practice of crawling through city streets has a Vancouver connection: it resonates with Korean-born Vancouver-based artist Jin-Me Yoon’s practice of dragging herself through various major international cities on a wheeled flatbed that is concealed under her prostrate body.
15. Thomas DeFrantz critiques what he identifies as Lepecki’s tendency to “poach” from unrelated lines of philosophy and to decontextualize arguments from their historical context (191). In her *Unsettling Space* (2006), Joanne Tompkins, who also offers an analysis of land-body reciprocity with the term “methexis” (to follow the curves and folds of the land), does so within the context of urgent aboriginal displacements and spatial “unsettlements.”
16. Jamieson has focused even more acutely on these questions with *Stone Soup* (1997)—in which she travelled between First Nations communities throughout British Columbia seeking permission to enter via the proper protocol that her colonial ancestors failed to follow—*Gawa Gyani* (1991), and *The Skidegate Project* in Haida Gwaii (2005). For more on Jamieson’s collaboration with First Nations peoples and the politics and traditions of protocol in northwest coast First Nations dance, see Dangeli’s excellent dissertation “Dancing Sovereignty: Protocol and Politics in Northwest Coast First Nations Dance” (2015).
17. This appears to be a draft response to questions posed by reporter Wendy Appleton.
18. For more on a “politics of the slant,” see cultural and urban theorist Paul Virilio’s formulation (2001, 52). For another kinetic reading of uneven ground, see Lorimer (2012).

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